EDITORIAL: Blame absence of presidential greatness on media

The Gazette

Scholar Shanto Iyengar has invented a fascinating phrase: media politics. Though Iyengar does not take the time to formally define it, he distills its principle in the book by the same name when he writes, "(I)mage is everything. ... The power of media imagery reverberates throughout political life." Media politics, Iyengar argues, is the defining lens, or interpretive paradigm, through which one can - indeed, must - study political behavior in the modern age. Summed up, modern politics mainly concerns itself with how "politicians use the media" and how "the media influence(s)

Media politics, Iyengar argues, gained hegemony relatively recently, partially because its influence relies on the TV's ubiquitous presence in U.S. households. Another key factor, states Iyengar, is the reformation of parties, especially regarding nominations. Whereas before the late 1960s, nomination of party candidates was mainly dominated by those in charge of the parties, "(t)he widespread adoption of primaries, along with changes in campaign finance regulations after the 1972 Watergate scandal, fundamentally altered the incentives of presidential hopefuls."

Iyengar notes, "(P)arties now realize that if they want to win in the general election, they are well advised to embrace candidates who are capable of. an effective media campaign, some party elites may choose to support and endorse candidates who have not played much of a role in the party or whose ideology is inconsistent with that of the party, if they have more resources with which to fight a media battle against their general-election opponent." Clearly, the emergence of mass media has transformed not only the political landscape.

"The end result of party reform and the rapid spread of television," Iyengar concludes, "(W)as a shift from party-based campaigns to candidate-based campaigns waged on television." In this way, Iyengar describes "media politics as the successor to party politics." Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis echo this observation in their book "Presidential Greatness" when they state, "Presidents no longer won elections and governed as the head of a party but were elected and governed as the head of a personal organization they had created in their own image." As a byproduct of the emergence of mass media, media has replaced the party as the intermediary institution between the individual and the government.

This development may seem like a beneficial development. It removes barriers to participation by eliminating the middle-man (i.e. the party), one might say, and gives citizens a more direct say in who is elected. Overall, one might describe media politics as more democratic than party politics. However, the United States' founders did not intend to create a pure democracy, they intended to establish a democratic republic, where the influence of the sovereign people would be tempered by rule of law and the intervention of elected representatives. Because media politics ignores this essential fact and weakens the party, serious unintended consequences have plagued the modern presidency, and modern politics in general.

The decay of the party, as much as it might mean for bringing the government closer to the people, is not necessarily a positive development because it subjects government to the whims and tyranny of popular opinion, which stifles the sort of great leadership that is willing to make difficult decisions and educate the public. Along these lines, Landy and Milkis write, "(T)he New Deal freed the executive from the local party politics that dominated the nineteenth-century polity, but at the cost of subjecting it to fractious national politics within the Washington beltway and volatile public opinion outside of it."

So it seems the decline of the party and the emerging dominance of the media in American politics cannot necessarily count as a beneficial change. Instead, it has destroyed the environment necessary for the development and emergence of great leaders.

The Gazette